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SUBJECT: SPECIAL MEDIA REACTION: PRESIDENT BUSH DELIVERS MESSAGE  
TO ISRAELI PUBLIC ON ISRAEL'S CHANNEL ONE TV

1. Summary. President Bush granted an exclusive interview to a national Israeli television station on August 11. Using the interview to convey a strong message to the Israeli public, President Bush emphasized U.S. support for Sharon's disengagement plan, spoke about Abbas's handling to date of the armed groups in Gaza, and delivered a message to Iran about its nuclear program. While all mainstream Hebrew and English publications reported on the interview, actual reaction was limited. End summary.

2. On Thursday, August 11, President Bush granted an exclusive interview to Israel's Channel One Television. The station broadcast excerpts on Thursday night and the full interview, during prime time on Friday and Saturday evenings, August 12 and

3. In addition to President Bush's reiterated support for the disengagement plan, the media also reported on the President's comments regarding Abbas's handling of the armed Gaza groups, Netanyahu's resignation, and future U.S. financial aid for Israel.

3. All mainstream publications carried limited coverage of the interview. However, reaction was muted, with President Bush's statements regarding Iran's nuclear program the only subject granted editorial space. On August 15, in a piece entitled "Belligerent Iran," conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized "President George W. Bush warned this weekend that the use of force remains an option... Time is running out while the world's single greatest sponsor of terror is coming closer to gaining nuclear capability. Before long, the military option may be the only remaining viable option." Mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Ahronot also quoted President Bush as saying that the U.S. will consider military action against Iran.

4. Local media found President Bush's message supportive of Sharon's disengagement plan. On August 12, diplomatic correspondent Herb Keinon of Jerusalem Post quoted a senior official in the Prime Minister's Office as saying "it was very important" for President Bush to "reiterate his continuing support for the plan. It sends a clear message to the Palestinians, and to those who oppose the plan, that the U.S. is squarely behind us on this." Israel Radio News broadcast on August 12, "President Bush believes that disengagement from the Gaza Strip will help Israel's security." Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz, running a Reuters piece on August 12, quotes Bush as saying that "the planned pullout of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip 'will be good for Israel.'"

5. Both Ha'aretz and popular, pluralist Maariv wrote more extensive reviews on the interview, noting that it seems to have been timed specifically to bolster Sharon's popular support on the eve of the politically contentious disengagement. Political correspondent Yossi Varter of Ha'aretz writes on August 15: "The relaxed interview Bush gave last Thursday at his ranch in Crawford, Texas to Channel 1's Washington correspondent Yaron Dekel was an intentional and carefully timed American attempt to tip the scales in Sharon's favor. It is easy to imagine the 'Arik' Sharon of yore making a scathing remark about such an attempt." In a satirical review of the interview, Maariv's television critic Assaf Schnieder writes on August 14: "When Israel TV is granted an exclusive interview with the American President, how many red lights should go off for us? Why, the suspicious television viewer should ask, why now? Maybe, just maybe, Bush got some phone call from 'Prime Minister' [in English] Sharon? 'I need you, George. Set this up for me; there'll be a disengagement; I owe you.' ... This is less a journalistic interview and more Bush's official request to the Israelis at the last moment before the evacuation begins. The purpose of this move is to tell us: 'This is worth your while - America promises.'"

KURTZER